

Introduction

Spinoza's Jewish Modernities

I.

Ask a Jew a question, the old joke goes, and he will answer you with another question. However trite, this saying seems particularly apt to the problem of defining Jewishness in the modern world, which has come to be identified with a question as terse as it is dizzyingly complex: “Who is a Jew?” While boundary questions have accompanied Jews throughout their millennial history of exile and dispersion, modernity has seen a dramatic increase in both their number and intensity. In premodern times, the near universal authority of Jewish sacred law (or Halakhah), combined with the near universal pattern of Jewish self-government, made for near universal consensus on the religious, ethnic, and corporate determinants of Jewish identity. Being Jewish meant that one was either matrilineally a Jew by birth or a convert to Judaism in accordance with Halakhah; it also meant that one belonged to the autonomous Jewish community, membership in which was compulsory for all Jews. The challenge to traditional rabbinic norms that began with the Enlightenment’s critique of religion eroded the halakhic parameters of Jewishness; the leveling of the ghetto walls as a result of Emancipation did the same for the physical barriers; and, for all the new boundaries that have been erected in the past three hundred years (in the case of the State of Israel, actual political and territorial boundaries), the situation that prevails today is one of definitional anarchy, where not only *who* or *what* is Jewish, but to an even greater extent the criteria for exemplary Jewishness, are bitterly contested. The crack in what was once more or less united in Jewish life—religion and ethnicity—has resulted in infinite permutations of Jewish identity where one or the other is primary, and at the extremes, to the prospect (if rarely the plausibility) of Judaism without Jewishness and Jewishness without Judaism. All the above have conspired to make “Who is a Jew?” a conundrum for which, indeed, there is no simple answer. We might even say that the hallmark of modern Jewish identity *is* its resistance

to—and, at the same time, obsession with—definition. It is shadowed by a question mark that constantly looms.

Like battles over national identity in the modern state, which tend to be fiercest along the frontier, clashes over the nature and limits of Jewishness have frequently taken the shape of controversies over the status—and stature—of marginal Jews past and present. There is, by now, a virtual cottage industry of academic and popular literature asserting the Jewishness of “cosmopolitan” intellectuals of Jewish origin, in particular those who innovated in dramatic, even revolutionary ways. These allegations are often sophisticated arguments, grounded in thorough empirical research and sensitive to the complexities of identity. Yet their discursive origins stand at a long distance from the ivory tower of scholarship. They start, typically, as efforts to lodge a uniquely Jewish claim to a Heine, Einstein, or Freud, motivated in part by a desire for standard-bearers of an agnostic and even atheistic Jewish identity. And even in their more sober, scholarly form these arguments often betray, wittingly or unwittingly, their authors’ deep spiritual kinship with their subject.

The Jewish rehabilitation of historical heretics and apostates with a vexed relationship to Judaism has become so much a part of contemporary discourse that it is difficult to imagine secular Jewish culture without it. Yet this tendency has a beginning as well as a template in modern Jewish history. The *Ur*-reclamation in the litany of such Jewish reclamations is that of the Amsterdam philosopher, arch-heretic, biblical critic, and legendary conflator of God and Nature, Baruch (or Benedictus) Spinoza (1632–1677)—“the first great culture-hero of modern secular Jews,” and still the most oft-mentioned candidate for the title of first modern secular Jew.¹

II.

Spinoza, famously, was a lifelong bachelor who left no offspring. Yet, if not a biological father, he has few equals when it comes to claims of intellectual fatherhood. A bird’s-eye-view of his reception in Western thought reveals a running perception of Spinoza as a “founding father” of modernity, or perhaps we should say modernities, given the diverse and often contradictory schools of thought from the seventeenth century onward laid at his doorstep. Liberals and communitarians, absolute idealists and historical materialists, humanists and antihumanists, atheists, pantheists, and even panentheists have claimed Spinoza as a precursor. In the past two decades alone,

Spinoza has been credited with fathering, or at least foreshadowing liberal democracy, radical Enlightenment, the turn toward immanence in contemporary thought and culture, neo-Marxist theory and politics, even recent trends in brain science.² A recurring hero in master narratives of secularization, he has also figured prominently in movements, from Romanticism to “deep ecology,” that have sought to resacralize the natural world.³ One would be hard-pressed to identify more than a handful of developments in modern thought that have not been traced, at one point or another, to the seventeenth-century freethinker.

The Jewish reception of Spinoza presents a similar panoply of paternity claims. Excommunicated by the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam in 1656 for his “horrible heresies” and “monstrous deeds,” Spinoza defected from Judaism, rejecting its traditional beliefs, practices, and teachings—but without ever converting to another religion. For this reason he is often seen as an originator in yet another sense—namely, as the first modern, secular Jew.

Yet Spinoza’s Jewish modernity has been construed no less diversely than his philosophical modernity *tout court*, or, for that matter, than the label “modern, secular Jew” itself. Over time, partisans of Jewish liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and various cross-pollinations of these and other isms have held up Baruch or Benedictus as a harbinger. He has figured as the quintessential “non-Jewish Jew” and as Judaism’s best ambassador for the monotheistic idea, as a prototype of assimilation and a prophet of political Zionism, as a consummate rationalist and a closet Kabbalist, as a “reforming Jew” and a radical secularist. The mutability of his image has been such that in the course of his reception he has been linked to personalities who span the gamut of modern Jewish cultural icons—from other exemplars of secular heresy like Heine, Marx, and Freud; to such medieval luminaries as Maimonides and Ibn Ezra; to the other famous seventeenth-century Amsterdam heretic Uriel Acosta (or da Costa); to the towering figure of both the German and Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn; and to messiahs like Jesus and Shabbetai Zvi. To quote one leading Jewish cultural historian, Spinoza has served as a “palimpsest for a variety of constructions of modern Jewish identity.”⁴

This book is a study of the rehabilitation of Spinoza in Jewish culture. More specifically, it is about the appropriation of Spinoza by a range of modern Jewish thinkers in order to validate—and in some cases critically interrogate—their own identities and ideologies. Spanning from Spinoza’s excommunication in 1656 to the effort of certain Zionists three centuries later to reverse the ban, and from the beginnings of the cult of the Amsterdam outcast among nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals to the emergence of this very cult as a literary and cultural topos in its own right, it explains how and why a notorious insurgent came to be seen as a turning

point between the medieval and the modern in Jewish history and a patron saint of secular Jewishness. In short, this is a history of the heretic turned hero. Yet it is more than merely a postmortem for Spinoza in modern Judaism. More generally, it is about how Jews from the Enlightenment to the present, by remembering and reclaiming Spinoza, have wrestled, in the absence of compulsory models, with what it means to be a modern, secular Jew. Indeed, the Jewish reception of Spinoza is nothing less than a prism for viewing the intellectual history of European Jews from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

But would Spinoza, in fact, accept responsibility for fathering any of the multiple Jewish modernities ascribed to him? Would he acknowledge paternity?

III.

Here we must make a crucial if often neglected distinction between the original intent of a particular thinker and how he or she is received. One path to understanding Spinoza's Jewish legacy—indeed, the road most taken to date—is trying to ascertain, on the basis of his own texts and whatever are deemed the most pertinent biographical, historical, and philosophical contexts, his own views on the nature and future of Jewishness. Since this is a matter heavily reliant on interpretation, opinions—not surprisingly—differ: over whether he should be considered the first secular Jew or an originator of Jewish secularism, over what construction of secular Jewishness, if any, he would be most likely to underwrite—indeed, over whether he should be considered a Jewish thinker in an affirmative sense at all. This dissension notwithstanding, those who proceed on this path seek Spinoza's meaning for Jewish modernity in what they hold Spinoza himself—the Spinoza of history—actually meant.⁵

This book approaches the topic of Spinoza's meaning for Jewish modernity from the vantage of his reception.⁶ It is a study, in other words, of the Spinoza of memory, not of history. In method it bears similarity to a form of historical inquiry dubbed by Egyptologist Jan Assmann “mnemohistory,” which “unlike history proper is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered.”⁷ I do not argue in this book that Spinoza was the first modern Jew, nor do I go so far as to claim that his rupture with Amsterdam Jewry marked the inception of the modern period in Jewish history or of modernity *in toto*. In fact, I am rather skeptical of such arguments, both as a general rule—periodizations that focus on a

single individual tend to lie in a nebulous no-man's-land between history and mythology—but also because in the case of Spinoza, this is a purely anachronistic construction, one that did not have, because it could not have had, any meaning for Spinoza himself.

Yet, whatever the truth or falsity of the view of Spinoza as “founding father” of the modern Jew, it is incontestable that he came to be regarded as such: by generations of freethinking Jews of various stripes, but also by a host of Jewish thinkers deeply wary of secularism and modernity, who despite recoiling from much of what they found in Spinoza—his far-reaching assault on the *raison d'être* of Judaism in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [*Theological-Political Treatise*], his uncompromising rejection of the reality of the supernatural—could not shake the feeling of trailing in his wake. The enduring effects of this image suggest that any effort to cleanse Spinoza of his Jewish appropriations—necessary though this may be in the quest for the historical Spinoza—cannot serve as the final word on Spinoza's Jewish legacy. If our aim is to chart the concrete reverberations of Spinoza's heresy in Jewish culture—to discover Spinoza's meaning for Jewish modernity in the history of his meanings—a preconceived notion of the “real” Spinoza may be more a hindrance than a help to understanding, since it risks preventing us from appreciating the impact of the appropriation of Spinoza by modern thinkers, whatever the justification.⁸ As Moshe Idel has written with regard to the study of Judaism, “the history of misunderstandings is as important as theories of understanding.”⁹ Just as no scholar of religion would argue that a certain religion is only what its sacred works mean in context, so no student of a certain secularism—here Jewish secularism—should make such a claim vis-à-vis its classic figures and texts. One could write a magisterial study of the French Revolution, isolating its numerous causes both short- and long-term, adducing all the relevant contexts, giving as accurate a picture of the Revolution in its historical moment as would appear feasible—and still a surplus would remain. For the “history” of the Revolution includes how it has been remembered, even misremembered. It includes how the Revolution came to figure as the ultimate myth of modernity, a model for later revolutionaries to reenact and for their opponents to resist.¹⁰ On a different scale, the same holds for the appropriation of Spinoza by Jews. However wide of the mark, such usage is a valuable window into the afterlife of Spinoza in modern Jewish consciousness, an afterlife that must be distinguished from the historical Spinoza, but which nevertheless forms part of the “history” of this arch-heretic and philosopher in the broadest sense.

Such appropriations of Spinoza are also, just as crucially, a window into how Jews have constituted a sense of their own modernity and the place of

“the secular” therein. For all the ink that has been spilled over the years—and especially, it seems, in recent years—on the concept of the secular, the process of secularization, and the ideology of secularism, the literature on the subject still remains essentially divided between two “master narratives” with remarkable staying power. To one side lie those who portray the rise of a secular, this-worldly orientation as a repudiation of a religious past, a rupture in the course of historical time between a “premodern” age grounded in divine authority, belief in the supernatural, and a general reliance on the tried and true and an authentically “modern” era committed to human autonomy, natural reason, and innovation.¹¹ To the other side lie those who stress the theological origins and dimensions of modernity and the premodern roots of secularism.¹² Yet for all the seeming incompatibility of these secularization stories—one of conscious rebellion *against* religion, the other of development from *within* it—they intersect in fascinating ways in Jewish appropriations of Spinoza.

On one hand, the modernity-as-rupture story has figured prominently in perceptions of Jewish history—and Spinoza has been arguably its preeminent symbol. His excommunication from Sephardic Amsterdam has served as a kind of primal scene of Jewish modernity, act one in the advent of the emancipated Jew. Unlike the eighteenth-century German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the other most oft-mentioned candidate for the title of “first modern Jew,” who became a model of Jewish-liberal symbiosis and of the reconciliation of Judaism and Enlightenment, his seventeenth-century predecessor would appear to epitomize not symbiosis, but separation; not reconciliation, but refusal. Spinoza *rejected* whatever concessions would have been necessary to remain in the Jewish community, opting instead for an uncompromising commitment to secular, cosmopolitan reason and the “freedom to philosophize.” He *rejected* the premise that the Bible, in its entirety, was the word of God, a move that led him famously to spurn the Maimonidean tack of reading scripture allegorically, all so as to shore up its authority and to maintain fidelity to revelation. He *rejected* faith in a personal, providential, and above all transcendent God, endorsing instead a theology of pure immanence that denied the reality of the supernatural. All told, his name and legacy seem synonymous with a flat no to tradition, without equivocation.

Whether this equation of Spinoza’s modernity with rupture holds up historically is debatable. Scholars from Manuel Joël in the nineteenth century to Harry Wolfson in the twentieth to Steven Nadler today have pointed to a medieval Jewish template for much of Spinoza’s thought, arguing that his articulation of the new emerged out of a deep and critical engagement with earlier traditions of biblical interpretation and religious philosophy.¹³

Others, like Jonathan Israel, have questioned the degree of this indebtedness.¹⁴ Whatever the proper interpretation of Spinoza, the history of his rehabilitation in modern Jewish culture—of his conversion into an icon for iconoclasts—reveals a thoroughly entangled relationship between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, indeed the sacred and the secular in the evolution of Jewish secularism. It may have been a perception of rupture from tradition, of a radical break with the past and embrace of the new, that conditioned and fueled the modern Jewish reappropriation of Spinoza; but Spinoza—even as a figure of rupture—came to provide many aspiring secular Jewish intellectuals with a touchstone and origin, with a feeling of being part of an immanent tradition of Jewish heresy, at times even with a surrogate father to replace the biological fathers and biblical Father of fathers they had rejected. On one hand, reclaiming Spinoza was a way of both secularizing Jewishness—by redrawing the boundaries of Jewish culture not only to accommodate but to venerate an implacable opponent of rabbinic Judaism—and of “Judaizing” secularity—by defining values such as “the freedom to philosophize,” the questioning of authority, the embrace of reason, science, and even universalism itself as distinctively “Jewish.” Yet in this very secularization of Jewishness and Judaizing of secularity via Spinoza we find, time and again, a striking persistence of sacral metaphors and motifs. The appropriators of Spinoza have invariably drawn on frames, scripts, and schemas with a long pedigree in the Jewish religious imagination, be it by depicting the Amsterdam heretic as a messiah of modernity or a “new guide to the perplexed,” recounting the first brush with his philosophical writings in the language of biblical prophecy, or even invoking the rabbinic formula to declare the ban null and void. The conferring on Spinoza of the label “first modern Jew” based in part on his rejection of the contemporizing biblical interpretation characteristic of rabbinic midrash has, from the beginning, been entwined with his own contemporization to speak to later dilemmas of Jewish identity; while the very construction of Spinoza as the “first secular Jew” has been saturated throughout with religious rhetoric.

Yet for all these paradoxes, if there is one aspiration that comes through repeatedly in the Jewish recovery of Spinoza, it is the hope of finding intellectual lineages of modernity and our “secular age” that are, to some degree, Jewish, or at least not solely Christian. The notion of a new secular outlook gestating while an insular Jewish minority, still subservient to rabbinic law and communal coercion, remained obstinately indifferent to the winds of change about it, stuck in its “self-imposed immaturity,” would become a pillar of Enlightenment antisemitism. As we will see in chapter 1, the excommunication of Spinoza would be seized on as fodder by many *philosophes* persuaded of a chasm between Judaism and Enlightenment.¹⁵ (Of course,

his having emerged from the Jewish community would be seized on by critics of his philosophy as proof of the religiously subversive ideas indigenous to Judaism.) Even today, though usually free of the malign intent of the radical enlighteners, many accounts of the origins of secularism—including ones written by scholars of Jewish history and thought—skip over the Jewish experience. As Ben Halpern wrote more than two decades ago, in an entry on “Secularism” for an anthology of essays on Jewish thought, “the history of Jewish secularism (unlike secularism in Occidental Christendom, which is a native growth maturing over the whole extent of European history) is the application to Jewish matters of standards carried over from the outside.”¹⁶ The history of the Jewish reclamation of Spinoza is, to a considerable extent, a rejoinder to this statement. From Berthold Auerbach, the nineteenth-century German Jewish author whose pioneering reception of Spinoza is the subject of chapter 3, to the American Jewish writer Rebecca Goldstein today, laying claim to Spinoza has been tantamount to laying claim to a Jewish role in the shaping of the modern and the formation of the secular.

IV.

As a study of the resonance that Spinoza has had for secular Jewish intellectuals, this book can be considered an inquiry into his “Jewish reception.” But what exactly is meant by this phrase? Beyond the problem of parameters—the difficulty of determining how broadly or narrowly to circumscribe Spinoza’s Jewish reception—there is also the question of just how *singular* it truly is. Spinoza, after all, has been claimed not only as a harbinger of Jewish secularism but of secularism, period. A prototype for sundry constructions of modern Jewish identity, he has also been credited with anticipating everything from militantly atheistic to “God-intoxicated” pantheistic forms of free thought, from democratic liberalism to Marxist materialism to the fashionable “bio-politics” of today’s radical critics of neoliberalism. By what right, then, do we treat the Jewish appropriation of Spinoza as anything more than a variation on a theme? For some, the very fact that Spinoza became an icon among Christian authors first might seem reason enough to chalk up the Jewish rehabilitation of Spinoza to the old Yiddish saying, *Vi es kristelt zikh, azoy yidelt zikh*. As it goes among Christians, so among Jews.

The challenge to the uniqueness of the Jewish encounter with Spinoza has grown even more pointed with the new interpretation of the Enlightenment and the origins of “philosophical modernity” proposed by the historian

Jonathan Israel over the last decade. Starting with his *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), Israel has assiduously argued that the Enlightenment, wherever it took root, divided into two warring factions: a one-substance “Radical Enlightenment” that reduced God and nature as well as mind and body to the same thing and jettisoned tradition, refusing to paper over its rupture with the past, and a two-substance “Moderate Enlightenment” that sought to promote greater rationality in increments but was reflexively accommodating of traditional religious belief, scriptural authority, and the status quo.¹⁷ Spinoza, per Israel, was central to both: He was “the intellectual backbone” of the Radical Enlightenment on the one hand, both source and symbol of its metaphysical and political secularism, and on the other, the ultimate *bête noire* of mainstream moderates, who opposed him as strenuously and obsessively as their more militant foes celebrated him. These two intellectual camps and the controversies between them, moreover, were remarkably cosmopolitan, contradicting, according to Israel, what was, for a time, the conventional wisdom that the “Enlightenment” was, in fact, a panoply of smaller “Enlightenments,” divided by region, nationality, culture, denomination, and discourse. Though Israel has yet to target it expressly, there is little doubt that, on the basis of this global approach, the idea of a distinctively Jewish reception of Spinoza—like the ideas of a distinctively Jewish Enlightenment, Jewish secularism, and Jewish modernity—would meet with skepticism.

Whatever the merits of Israel’s thesis regarding Spinoza’s colossal impact on modern Western thought in general, it certainly resonates with his impact on Jewish culture. As we will see in chapter 4, attitudes toward the Amsterdam philosopher *did* catalyze a division of the nineteenth-century Haskalah into “radical” and “moderate” camps. Overall, however, I contend that Israel’s pan-European model goes too far in effacing the peculiarities of Spinoza’s Jewish reception, in large measure because of the preoccupation of the latter with the theme of *identity*, with the question of whether Spinoza was, in fact, a “Jewish thinker,” or “one of us.” All the thinkers to be dealt with in this book acknowledged, indirectly or overtly, that Spinoza had a more loaded significance for them given their common Jewish origins. Some pursued, others resisted, still others dithered over a domesticating of Spinoza’s image within modern Judaism; yet they all believed that Spinoza had a special charge and relevance for them as Jews and “intellectuals.” To whitewash this specificity—to treat their receptions of Spinoza as a mere copy, or even a variant of a broader cultural phenomenon—would simply be a bad approach to the study of history. At the same time, in forming their impressions of Spinoza, these thinkers were not only in dialogue with earlier or contemporary Jewish reactions to the Amsterdam heretic. They were

also absorbing, building on, tweaking, revising, and sometimes outright repudiating non-Jewish framings of Spinoza's "Jewishness" and "modernity." Jews were shaped by—but they also in turn shaped—the shifting cultural memory of Spinoza; contra that Yiddish saying, there is no question here of one-sided influence and imitation. More so than with any archetypal "Jewish" figure with the exception of Moses and Jesus, the battle for control over Spinoza's image has occurred not simply within Judaism, but within an intellectual field occupied by both Jews and non-Jews. It is thus a central contention of this work that the individuality of a "Jewish reception" of Spinoza must be sought *within*, and not radically apart from, a reception where Jewish and non-Jewish voices have long been intertwined.

V.

The writing of history, as decades of postmodern criticism have made plain, is not a purely inductive process.¹⁸ Any historical narrative, however scrupulously loyal to the sources, is inevitably a result of innumerable conscious and unconscious decisions on the part of the author about what to select from an often overwhelming amount of evidence and how to structure the presentation of whatever is selected. Reception histories must be especially selective. No doubt, a "metahistorical" analysis of this historiographic genre would reveal a remarkably similar form and flow. Practically every reception study can be stripped down to a sequence of variations in the understanding of its subject, since if the memory of a historical person, object, or event merits tracing to begin with, it is likely to be diverse and protean, as otherwise it would not make for a very interesting or illuminating history. Yet any subject worthy of a reception history will also likely have a bounty of representations to choose from, ensuring that no one narrative is like another. The story of Spinoza's Jewish reception can be told in myriad ways. What follows is a brief discussion of my methodology, or how *I* have opted to tell this story—and why I believe this angle is both essential and illuminating.

To start, this is a cultural history of Spinoza's Jewish reception. Readings, including translations of Spinoza's works will certainly figure in our analysis, though this is emphatically *not* a history of the reception of a particular text or set of texts; and while modern Jewish philosophers of note can be found in both prominent roles and cameos, this is not a history of the Jewish philosophical response to Spinoza per se. My focus is rather on the place of Spinoza in the Jewish literary and cultural imagination. Spinoza's

reception by later Jewish philosophers constitutes only a slice—and by no means the largest slice—of a broader cultural phenomenon in which artists, novelists, dramatists, rabbis, publicists, historians, and even politicians have played a profound, even formative role. In trying to recover the Spinoza image in Jewish culture, I rely on a rich variety of sources, including not only philosophical treatises, but also things like historical novels, newspaper articles, anniversary tributes and *Festschriften*, visual representations, autobiographies, diaries, and correspondence. I also devote special attention to the “how” as much as the “what” in this study of cultural recuperation, considering the role played by schemas and metaphors (Spinoza as the “new” Maimonides), the rhetorical pairings of Spinoza with other historical icons, even by the sacred echoes of the Hebrew language itself in the creation of “the Jewish Spinoza.”¹⁹

The story I tell stretches from seventeenth-century Amsterdam to eighteenth-century Germany to nineteenth-century Central and Eastern Europe to twentieth-century Israel, Europe, and America, before concluding in an epilogue that considers the current vogue in appropriations of Spinoza. After an opening chapter that analyzes the “prehistory” of the Jewish rehabilitation of Spinoza, exploring how his Jewish origins figured in fashioning him into a cultural symbol among non-Jews first, I trace his shifting image across a spectrum of modern Jewish movements and milieus, from the Berlin *Haskalah* to early religious Reform and *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the Science of Judaism) in Germany to the East European *Haskalah*, Zionism, and Yiddish culture. Yet the table of contents, structured around individual receptions of Spinoza and the reception of these receptions, compensates for this broad chronological, territorial, and ideological sweep. Five thinkers stand at the center of my narrative. Chapter 2 probes the pioneering if only partial vindication of Spinoza by the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the first Jewish thinker, I contend, for whom Spinoza served, both positively and negatively, as a point of reference—in his own eyes, and certainly in the eyes of others. Staying in Germany but skipping ahead fifty years, chapter 3 finds the roots of the heroic and prototypical image of Spinoza in the historical fiction of the young Berthold Auerbach (1812–1882), using his engagement with the Amsterdam heretic in the 1830s as a lens for exploring tensions in early Reform Judaism between organic and revolutionary visions of religious change. Chapter 4 traces the migration of Spinoza’s Jewish reception eastward into the Hebrew Enlightenment of Central and Eastern Europe, concentrating on the writings of the Galician-born *maskil* (or Jewish enlightener) Salomon Rubin (1823–1910), the most zealous champion of Spinoza in nineteenth-century Hebrew letters and the first to translate the *Ethics* into Hebrew. Chapter 5

looks at twentieth-century Zionist appropriation of Spinoza as both a precursor and posthumous beneficiary of secular Jewish nationalism, devoting special attention to periodic efforts, first in Mandate Palestine and later in the State of Israel, to close the book on ostracism of Spinoza by formally revoking the excommunication—a campaign initiated by the protagonist of the chapter, the Russian Zionist scholar and Hebrew literary critic Yosef Klausner (1874–1958). The sixth and final chapter explores how the Yiddish writer and Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991) struggled to come to terms with modern Jewish identity not by engaging with Spinoza directly, but by dealing in fiction with various Jewish understandings of, and reactions to, Spinoza as secular hero.

My decision to study Spinoza's Jewish reception in rival Jewish movements through the prism of individual encounters with Spinoza is not simply an aesthetic choice but relates to a central contention of the work. If the first and most obvious source of the diversity of the Jewish reception of Spinoza was the fact that he elicited a welter of ideological and discursive fashionings, there was another way in which this ambiguity was manifest not just between, but within the many permutations of his image—even within those treatments that most resembled an embrace. When we zero in on concrete “uses” of Spinoza, we find that his invocation as a precursor was rarely a matter of making him a stand-in for a flattened, already worked-out image of the “modern Jew”: Spinoza the liberal Jew, Spinoza the maskil, Spinoza the Zionist. More often than not, it was part of the construction of an identity, with all the attendant ambiguities of this process, and not its finished product. What appears from afar an uncomplicated gesture of ideological appropriation (or expropriation, as the case may be) may reveal up close a dense undergrowth of questions and tensions. This becomes clearer the more intently we interrogate the lives of those who sought to reclaim Spinoza.

In *Freud's Moses* (1993), his penetrating study of the Jewish identity of the founder of psychoanalysis, Yosef H. Yerushalmi aptly observes that “to be a Jew without God is, after all, historically problematic and not self-evident, and the blandly generic term *secular Jew* gives no indication of the richly nuanced variety of the species.”²⁰ Broadening this category of the “Jew without God” to include one who has given up faith in the personal, commanding deity of biblical revelation, without necessarily repudiating the existence of God altogether—that is, someone like Spinoza—we can better understand the resonance of the Amsterdam heretic within Jewish culture. What gets obscured in the debate over whether Spinoza was the first modern or secular Jew is not simply the anachronistic nature of this perception or even of the very debate itself. We also lose sight of the driving force behind this

reputation, the connection between the “historically problematic and not self-evident” nature of secular Jewish identity and the need to find a historical beginning and script for it and thereby firm it up. If the continued obsession with Spinoza in Jewish culture, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, is any indication, what it means to be a modern, secular Jew remains as elusive—and the genealogical imperative that feeds on this elusiveness as powerful—as ever.